

MAO ZEDONG'S "ON CONTRADICTION," PART I

The previous column in the series on the history of dialectics gave a brief summary of Mao's essay "On Practice." This week's column is the first of several analyzing Mao's essay "On Contradiction."

It is hard to exaggerate the influence that this one essay by Mao has had. It is likely that more people alive now have read it than any other text on dialectics. Compared to other works explaining the "new philosophy" that was developed in the 1930s in the Soviet Union, it is quite clear, and much of what it says is correct. It also lays out the Chinese Communist Party's version of the tremendously destructive political line adopted by the international communist movement in 1935, the "united front against fascism." Since this wrong political line leads to wrong philosophy, it is important to separate what is correct in the essay from what is false and reactionary.

Two World Outlooks

The essay begins by explaining the difference between metaphysics and dialectics, two ways of looking at the universe and how it changes. The metaphysical way of thinking sees the world as made up of isolated, unchanging things. It sees things as static and stable, not changing at all or at most changing by the increase or decrease in the quantity of something. Metaphysical thinking claims to find capitalist exploitation and competition in all past human societies, even before social classes arose. It sees the changes that do happen as the result of external forces like geog-

raphy and climate.

Mao's essay explains the outlook of materialist dialectics, which says that things undergo real changes in quality, changes that produce what never existed before. These changes are not primarily the result of external forces, but of the internal conflict, the "contradictoriness" inside things and processes. Great social changes don't result mainly from geography and climate, but from internal social forces. China was undergoing big changes when Mao wrote but the climate was not. It was internal factors, especially class conflict, which was driving these changes, although some external circumstances are also required. Changes in nature are also mainly the result of internal contradictions.

Mao gave examples that make clearer the idea that changes come from the inside. If it is kept at the right temperature for a while, a fertilized egg turns into a baby chicken, but "no temperature can change a stone into a chicken." The temperature is necessary for the chicken to develop, but what is internal to the egg drives the process of creating a chicken.

Mao applied this internal analysis to war: "In battle, one army is victorious and the other is defeated, and both the victory and the defeat are determined by internal causes." The winning side had strength and good leadership. The losing side was weak or had incompetent leadership.

We should note that Mao is not saying simply that the stronger side wins. A weak army whose

leaders understand their weaknesses does not have to be defeated. It can retreat or use hit-and-run tactics. Mao makes a similar point about the defeat of the communists by Chinese capitalist forces in 1927, caused by political mistakes ("opportunism") within the communist party. He concludes that "to lead the revolution to victory," the party must "depend on the correctness of its political line and the solidity of its own organization."

The Universality of Contradiction

Mao wrote that contradiction is universal in two ways. The first is that there are contradictions in everything in nature and in society, and these contradictions determine how the thing develops and changes. The second is that opposite sides of the contradictions in a process exist from its beginning to its end. Mao repeated arguments and examples from Engels and Lenin to show that contradictions are universal, unfortunately repeating Engels' incorrect claim that motion is itself a contradiction (this mistake was discussed in *Red Flag*, February 20, 2014). Mao also gave his own examples of interconnected opposites in war, like offense and defense or advance and retreat. This network of opposites "constitutes the totality of war, pushes its development forward and solves its problems."

Mao's discussion of the universality of contradictions is intended to introduce one of the main topics of the essay, the "particularity of contradiction." We will discuss this in the next column.